

# Achieving Small School Success in Washington State

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Of Washington State's 296 school districts, two-thirds have 2,000 or fewer students. These small school districts provide unique learning opportunities for our children, but also present special challenges to achieving the higher standards called for in the state education reform bill and recent federal legislation.

What follows is an overview of the impediments that our small schools face, a vision for future success, and strategies to help us meet the challenges. The report, which grew out of two educational summits held in 2002, represents a collaboration of many different stakeholders. Educators and board members on the frontlines in small school districts contributed their perspectives, as did representatives of organizations such as the Washington Association of School Administrators, Washington State School Directors' Association, Parents and Teachers Association, State Legislature, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, State Board of Education, Rural Education Center, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Our goal is to develop a powerful common voice regarding Washington's small schools and to be heard whenever decisions are made that affect education in our state. We do not seek to be divisive, creating an "us" versus "them" situation. We recognize that most of the needs of Washington's districts are the same, whether they're located in densely populated urban centers or rural and isolated towns.

However, small schools have unique needs that must be addressed so that their programs are uniform with larger districts and *all* students are on a level playing field.

## Our Beliefs

- **The mission of public education in a democratic society is to educate all students.** Public schools bridge the divide of culture, advantage, and diverse perspectives to promote equality, freedom, respect, and justice. We understand and value our charge to keep public education—the foundation of democracy—safe and responsive for future generations.
- **All students—children of color, poverty, and privilege, as well as those new to our shores—can achieve high standards of learning, regardless of the location and size of their schools or school districts.** We support the state of Washington's education reform efforts and embrace the rigor of higher standards.
- **Flexibility in how schools receive and use resources can contribute to their success.** If students achieve at various rates, it is logical to assume that schools will achieve at various rates as well. Modifying rules and allowing schools some latitude with new learning and funding models will help increase achievement.

## Challenges Facing Small School Districts

Washington can be characterized generally as having higher population densities and stronger economies west of the Cascades and lower population density with weaker economies east of the mountains. Agriculture and forestry dominate economic activity in the less populous areas where most small school districts are found. These economic and geographic disparities impact small schools in a number of ways:

- More students in small school districts live in poverty: 45.2% of students in small districts are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch compared to 34.3% of students in larger districts with more than 2,000 enrollment. (See table to the right.)
- Higher numbers of migrant students live in small school districts. Of the 19 school districts with at least 25% limited English proficiency (LEP) students, 13 are small districts. All 19 are located in districts of 5,000 or fewer students.
- The percentage of students meeting Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) standards is lower in small districts at every grade and content level. (See line charts on page 4).
- Children in small districts are generally more dispersed and have longer bus rides, with some students spending as much as three hours a day in transit. This precludes extending the school day to provide extra help to struggling students.

- Small school districts have difficulty generating the economies of scale necessary for the array of support services required by low-achieving students. In addition, state funding formulas are often based on FTE, rather than a base allocation plus FTE, which severely impacts the ability of small school districts to pay for a number of mandated programs and services.

firsthand the results of their policymaking.

- Administrators and staff are closer to school reform issues because there are fewer layers of bureaucracy impeding change. Teachers are accustomed to site-based management, staff collaboration, and the need for flexibility.
- Teachers know their students well. Students may have the same

**Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility (FRLE) Rates by District Enrollment Size; Washington State, Fall 2002**

District Size	Number of Districts	Enrollment	FRLE Count	FRLE Percentage
<b>Enrollment under 2,000</b>	177	115,301	52,078	45.2%
<b>Enrollment 2,000 plus</b>	105	869,317	298,102	34.3%
<b>All Districts</b>	282	984,618	350,180	35.6%

Note: 14 districts do not have lunch programs

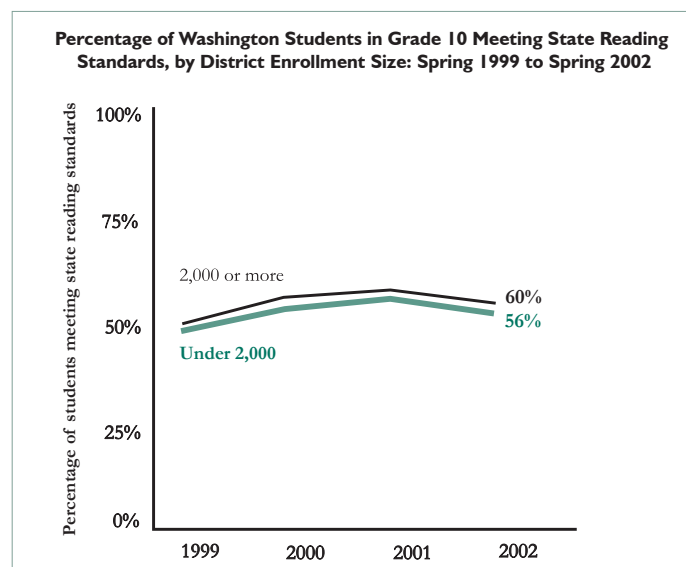
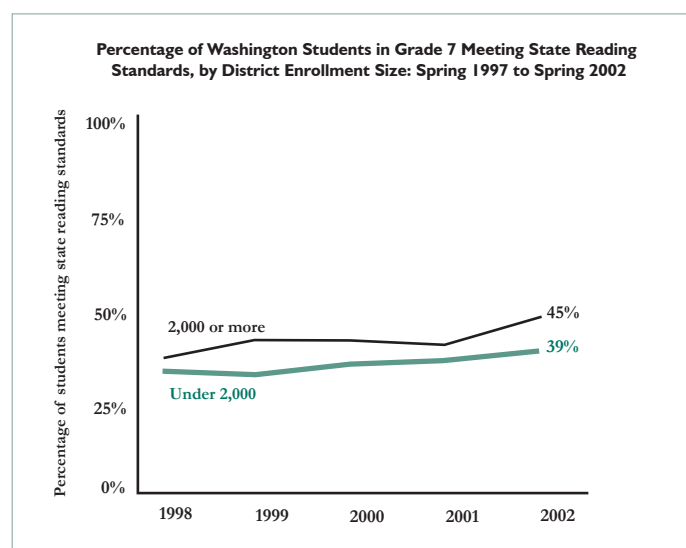
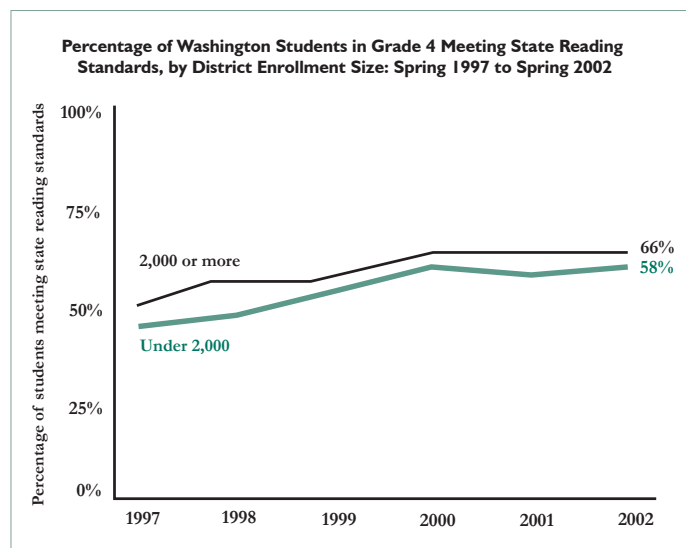
## What Works in Small Schools

Despite a lack of resources and a disproportionate number of low-income students, small schools do have certain advantages:

- Small numbers facilitate more communication and enhanced personal relationships among students, staff members, board members, parents, and the community at large.
- The school is at the heart of the community. Community members take a broad interest in what goes on at school and often serve as volunteers.
- School boards are closer to their schools. Board members are often parents of students and can see

instructor for multiple years, and may have siblings who were taught by the same teacher. Relationships with parents have been established over time.

- Students benefit from more personalized instruction. The low adult to student ratio provides a sense of security.
- Students may experiment with a variety of extracurricular activities and discover unknown talents. Because the student body is small, more youngsters can assume leadership roles and participate in sports, band, drama, chorus, and the newspaper club. Because of these unique characteristics, studies have shown that low-income and at-risk students



often perform better in small schools. All students demonstrate lower dropout rates and better attendance. Researcher Mary Anne Raywid, reporting in a 1999 *ERIC Digest*, stated that qualitative studies have “firmly established small schools as more productive and effective than large ones.” A 2000 study published by the Bank Street College of Education—*Small Schools: Great Strides, A study of new small schools in Chicago*—concludes that “(these small schools) significantly increase student persistence and student performance. More students complete courses, get higher grades, and graduate. Further, parents, teachers, students, and community members alike are more satisfied with their schools, believe in them, and want to see them continue to grow.”

Private benefactors, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, have provided millions of dollars in grants to fund the creation of smaller, more personalized middle and secondary schools within large districts across the country. The Gates Foundation also helped establish a Small Schools Center at the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education. Ironically, though, comparatively few resources are available for existing small school districts, located primarily in small, rural, or remote areas.

**Note to line charts:** While smaller districts have lower proportions of students meeting state standards, they have higher Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility rates: Districts with enrollment under 2,000--45% Districts with enrollment of 2,000 or more--34%

# Major Issues for Small School Educational Reform

With the implementation of education reform, Washington state has fundamentally changed the “what” and “how” of public schools. There are new demands and levels of accountability as to what must be achieved by public schools and their students. That, in turn, has required a shift in how we structure schools, including the allocation of time and resources.

At the 2002 educational summits, participants agreed on a number of key issues that have a direct bearing on whether small schools can successfully carry out the new mandates of school reform. These are:

- Equity
- Program support
- Staffing
- Flexibility/Adaptability
- Facilities

We believe it is our duty to inform policymakers and the public about these issues because our students deserve the same quality programs, instructors, facilities, and access to technology as their peers in larger districts. They deserve the same opportunity to succeed.

## Equity

### Vision

All schools are funded equitably to provide all students with equal access to appropriate educational opportunities to meet federal and state mandates.

### Challenge

To equitably provide districts of all sizes with the financial resources to make the vision a reality.

### Background

The current state funding structure for K–12 school districts is based on an allocation formula that provides financial resources for a basic education program on a per-pupil basis. State funds are supplemented by federal funds that address specific needs. Local funds are intended to provide program enhancements beyond the definition of basic education.

Today, state funding falls short of the state’s constitutional obligations for schools of all sizes. For small schools, there are additional factors that further exacerbate the problem:

1. Per-pupil allocations of state funds don’t fully take into account the economy of scale that benefits larger schools.
2. A few student FTEs in a small district can dramatically change the district’s demographics from year to year. This shift—up or down—can alter a district’s budget and undermine strategic plans by overburdening one or more parts of the system.
3. Fulfilling federal mandated special education needs and providing services to limited English proficiency students can have a disproportionate effect on small districts. One expensive special needs student can trigger a severe negative financial impact on other programs.
4. Transportation departments in small districts face the challenges

of distance, geography, and low ridership. The current funding system calculates distance “as the crow flies,” ignoring obstacles that may require more circuitous routes.

5. Assessed valuations vary greatly from district to district. To raise the same resources per pupil, local patrons in property-poor districts may pay three to four times the tax rate as those in districts with higher assessed valuation.
6. Districts that do not maintain a high school face supplemental “non-high payments” and added transportation costs for students that they send to neighboring districts, even though they receive no state allocation for those pupils.

Washington’s Basic Education Act, written in 1977, should be updated and redefined. Funding small schools on a per-student basis makes less sense as district size decreases. When such a formula is used, the dollars allocated to small districts often don’t stretch far enough to buy what legislators and policymakers envisioned. In addition, the educational landscape has altered dramatically since the 1970s with the advent of high technology; the addition of many unfunded mandates; expanding special education requirements; legal costs; the introduction of state and federal learning standards; and Washington Assessment of Student Learning requirements.

### Solutions

In addition to reexamining the Basic Education Act, other possible solutions include:

- Ensure adequate emergency funds for small schools.
- Lobby for changes in federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation that differentiates “educational needs” from “health care needs” of special education students.
- Consider the special circumstances faced by small district transportation systems when creating funding formulas.
- Require the state to assume “non-high payments” for districts that send high school students to neighboring communities.

## Program Support

### Vision

All school districts will have organizational support and access to needed resources to serve all students.

### Challenges

Honor the need for local control; provide resources for a comprehensive educational program; overcome time constraints and inflexible regulations; develop new models of delivery systems; and build up the role of Educational Service Districts (ESDs) for small schools.

### Background

When small schools are faced with “one size fits all” requirements without receiving adequate resources, it is unrealistic to expect them to meet the intent of federal and state laws and to maintain equity in program offerings. Additional program support is needed for administration,

teachers, and support personnel in small schools. Other critical areas include technology, grant writing, and enrichment programs. Each of these categories is examined below, along with the issue of recognition.

### Administration

Under the current state funding formulas, some small school districts have just a 0.2 FTE allocation—calculated with a 1986 funding formula—for administrators, which equates to one day per week. This is inadequate in terms of providing support to staff and ensuring safe conditions. Other issues include:

1. Most administrators in small districts have no central office or specialist support to help prepare myriad required reports and complicated grant applications for critically needed funding. Rules, regulations, paperwork, and mandatory reports for the state and federal government are the same for small and large districts, regardless of staff size.
2. A number of small districts have more buildings than they have administrators. School leaders must make hard choices between working on-site for the direct benefit of students or attending important meetings off-site and satisfying external audiences.
3. Because many small school administrators are less than full-time employees, they may function as both principal and superintendent. A heavy work load and inadequate compensation can lead to job burnout and high turnover. This situation makes it

difficult for small districts to recruit and retain quality administrators who have the creative vision and skills to implement educational reform.

4. Small school administrators often face pressures that their large district counterparts do not experience: they perform under the microscope of community scrutiny; they control what may be the largest budget in town; and they are never “off duty.”

### Solutions

In collaboration with other partners, we need to institute an ongoing program of education for legislators and boards of directors on issues of local control and meeting the unique needs of each community. Other steps include:

- Collect quantitative and qualitative data that support success stories in small school districts in Washington state.
- Identify resources within the small school community and develop skill-based consortia.
- Fund a minimum of 1.0 FTE administrator per district.
- Provide Educational Service District (ESD) specialist support for special education and safety net applications, ESEA title programs, grant writing, accountability reports, and curriculum/professional development.
- Provide “models” for report writing and support collective reporting and accountability.
- Hire and share “specialists” among districts, including counselors, psychologists, and speech therapists.



## Teachers

1. Teaching staff suffer from a lack of curriculum support: they need assistance evaluating curriculum to match needs with appropriate materials, resources, and training. Small school districts average just .04 curriculum specialists per district while districts with more than 10,000 students have an average of 6.6 FTE and districts with between 5,000 and 10,000 students have 2.0 FTE devoted to curriculum development.
2. Professional development is impeded by a lack of funds, shortage of substitute teachers, and long travel distances to training sites.
3. Many teachers in small districts face a broad-spectrum, multiage classroom. Often, there's only one teacher per grade level. The resulting isolation prevents teaming or the cross-fertilization of ideas with peers.
4. Each curriculum change requires that every teacher participates in the training, since there aren't separate curriculum teams for different subjects.

## Solutions:

- Maintain Educational Service District funding and programs. Often the ESDs function as a central office for small schools.
- Develop ESD cadres of curriculum support staff to provide training, support, and liaison efforts.
- Create a clearinghouse for recommended curriculum and adoptions.

## Support Personnel

There is a direct relationship between the size of the district and the number of clerical staff. In small districts, a few clerical personnel wear many hats and are often stretched to the breaking point. Delegation of duties is often not an option, as there is no one else to do the job.

Recruiting specialists like counselors, psychologists, and special education teachers in large districts is difficult and becomes even more problematic for small districts. That's particularly true when these individuals cannot be offered full-time employment.

As previously suggested, sharing specialists among small school districts could help ameliorate this problem, along with additional funding and a reduction in state paperwork. Another solution is simplified procedures for small districts that take into account limited staff resources.

## Technology

Keeping current with hardware and software needs, wiring, and technical training are time-consuming and expensive. Technicians for systems support are also costly and may not be available in the community.

Washington's K–20 Initiative has brought videoconferencing capabili-



ties to all districts. Smaller, isolated districts can benefit greatly from distance learning, online training, classroom-to-classroom activities, virtual field trips, and cyberlearning. However, small districts do not necessarily have the resources to take full advantage of technology.

## Grant Writing

While there are many opportunities to finance school district improvements through grants, it is difficult for small schools to take advantage of them.

- Isolated districts with overworked staffs often lack awareness of



- Provide categorical grant flexibility.
- Draw grant readers from small communities.

### Enrichment Programs

Small communities often have limited enrichment opportunities for young children and teens.

Daycare programs, preschools, private schools, teen centers, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and even libraries may not be available for parents and children.

School-sponsored programs can fill the void.

They can offer options

such as preschool, extended day programs, community access to computers at night, summer camps, and field trip opportunities that expose youngsters to activities that children in larger districts take for granted. To level the playing field, these opportunities must be funded.

Some schools are currently using grants from the Rural Education Achievement Program—REAP—to fund enrichment programs. REAP, which was established as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, is a federal funding stream to help rural districts operate within the unique situations in which they exist.

### Recognition

There are many unsung heroes laboring to achieve high standards and quality programs in their small

school districts: teachers, board members, support staff, and administrators.

Opportunities for recognition are limited because numerous awards are based on student FTEs. Though small districts make up two-thirds of Washington's school districts, the odds of winning awards favor the remaining one-third of the districts. Likewise, our students often do not have the opportunity to compete for statewide honors.

### Solutions

- Include more entry categories for awards.
- Offer enough awards in the small schools category to accurately represent the number of districts that meet those criteria.
- Investigate statistical methods that allow comparisons of test scores for small sample sizes.
- Recognize innovative, non-standard achievement strategies and assessment.
- Eliminate the glass ceiling for small school district superintendents, recognizing that their abilities are transferable to larger districts.

Student success stories happen everywhere. They occur because someone developed a model, took a risk, or created an opportunity. Such successes need to be shared and the models replicated in other areas. Where better to find new programs that work and people to lead them than in the crucible of small schools? Expanding the possibility of recognition for everyone increases incentives for excellence.

appropriate grants and aren't able to commit the time to complete detailed applications.

- Trained personnel aren't available to generate grants or administer them.
- Most grant reviewers come from large, urban areas. They may lack knowledge of conditions facing small school districts—and even have an unrecognized bias—which works against these small applicants.

### Solutions

- Address the above barriers and raise awareness with ESDs, professional organizations, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.
- Expand Web sites, consortia, and grant booths at conferences to publicize grant opportunities.
- Make grant writers available at ESDs.



## Staffing

### Vision

Small schools will successfully attract, employ, and retain sufficiently qualified and capable staff to meet district and individual student needs.

### Challenges

Meeting new certification/endorsement requirements mandated by the state and federal governments; attracting qualified, certified staff to small, rural schools that lack housing, amenities, professional development, and social opportunities; staffing programs such as vocational, technology, and honors classes.

### Background

The ability to hire and retain a quality teaching staff is a challenge for any size district. Large districts are able to expend a great deal of energy on recruitment, and offer more paid days, higher cocurricular pay, and local options such as TRI-pay (Time Responsibility Incentive funds that supplement teacher salaries). Small school districts lack incentives to attract better candidates, except in instances where a candidate chooses to work in an area for quality of life or other personal reasons.

Other issues that present roadblocks in staffing include:

1. Teacher absences are difficult to fill because of substitute teacher shortages.
2. There's a lack of employment opportunities for spouses of married teachers.

3. Finding individuals with the right certification and endorsements to fit available openings in small districts is difficult and will become even more so with new federal mandates in the No Child Left Behind Act.

### Solutions

- Create broader certification and endorsement categories, including a liberal arts endorsement for small schools.
- Revise placement rules to encourage practicum or student teaching opportunities in rural settings, thus encouraging eventual placement in these communities.
- Develop certification programs for multiage classrooms.
- Offer certification programs that address the benefits of teaching in small schools.
- Give bonuses to attract teachers to isolated, small schools.
- Encourage beginning secondary school teachers to seek multiple certifications at the time they earn their original certification.
- Allow competency testing as an option for adding certification areas.
- Centralize continuing education/certification records.
- Create a new certification system that's portable and compatible with cross-training institutions; make it user friendly to rural and small schools.
- Provide housing or travel allotments for teachers who live in isolated communities.

## Flexibility/Adaptability

### Vision

All students are prepared. All districts are supported and treated with respect. All stakeholders develop effective processes that offer enough flexibility to allow individual districts to meet their needs and those of their students in the best ways possible.

### Challenges

Achieve true equity for all students; allow for multiple models; develop a unified definition of terms like rural, remote, necessary, non-high, urban, and small.

### Background

As noted before, one size does not fit all. The current system should be altered to allow for the special challenges and realities of small school districts. In the classroom, teachers are asked to adapt their curriculum and teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners. In the same way, small districts will benefit from the freedom to be flexible and adapt rules and regulations to fit their unique circumstances.

### Solutions

- Establish a database with resources and contacts for programs that work.
- Include small school representation on policy committees, in focus groups, and other statewide summits that impact educational decisionmaking.

## Facilities

### Vision

All students are served in safe, healthful, well-maintained facilities that effectively support current and future educational programs. Small schools are recognized as the center of the community and serve as the de facto community center.

### Challenges

Hire and retain trained and qualified personnel to properly maintain facilities and technology tools; increase square footage to adequately accommodate basic ancillary needs; meet regulations and educational program needs.

### Background

Seventy percent of Washington's schools are more than 20 years old. School bonds for capital improvements are difficult to pass in communities where poverty rates are high and property values are low. Other problems include:

1. Budgeting for building maintenance is often a low priority when resources are concentrated on student achievement.
2. Building and safety issues may be delayed until an emergency occurs.
3. When an emergency does strike, repairs are often very expensive.
4. Many small school districts lack facilities that are standard in large district schools. These include gymnasiums, cafeterias, covered outdoor play areas, staff workrooms, and staff restrooms.

### Solutions

- Create an equitable funding formula for essential facilities in resource-poor districts.
- Identify capital funds other than school bonds for adequate facilities; establish more programs like REN (Renovation) grants.
- Take the lead in exploring liability issues that stem from community use of school facilities.
- Work with ESDs to continue their commitment to train maintenance staff (particularly in maintaining outdated equipment and facilities).



## Conclusion

Washington's large and small districts are committed to achieving student success, building support for student growth, and finding solutions to problems that may block our progress toward these goals. The state's small districts face unique barriers in accomplishing that mission. We seek support for identifying and building models that make sense in smaller environments. We also ask for

consideration of our special needs.

There are multiple organizations and committees that speak for small schools. We believe there is a need for a collective voice, partnerships, and collaborations that will enable us to be heard clearly in the halls of the legislature and anywhere decisions impact small schools.

Finally, we respectfully suggest that we all heed the example of General H. Norman Schwartzkopf, the retired commander who led U.S. troops in the Gulf War. In his 1992 autobiography, *It Doesn't Take a Hero*, Schwartzkopf states that he refused

to allow American soldiers under his command to enter battle until he had provided everything they needed to be successful. As parents, professionals, and educators, can we ask any less of our schools and our state as we revolutionize public education?

We urge state lawmakers and policymakers to equip small school districts and our students with the necessary resources to be successful. We also invite

these constituencies to use small schools as laboratories for innovation. Small school districts can serve as ideal sites to pilot new programs before they're introduced statewide. We are nimble, able to turn on a dime, and can institute programs with fewer materials and fewer staff to train. Together, we can blaze a trail that will benefit all of Washington's students, no matter where they live or how big or small their school district is.

# A Tale of Three Districts

Dry statistics can't tell the whole story. It's difficult to appreciate the reality of attending or working in a small school until you've driven down dusty two-lane roads, peered in multigrade classrooms, and listened to the familiar, easy banter between staff and kids in the hallways. You discover the challenges of organizing a band with just two players and the joys of establishing long-lasting relationships with families. You see the incredible commitment of teachers who spend their own time and money to give students enrichment activities they won't get at home or anywhere else.

Each of Washington state's small school districts has a different tale to tell. We've chosen just three to put a face on some of the issues presented in the preceding pages. Tiny Index School District struggles with staggering cuts in federal funding and layoffs that will tear apart their close-knit school community. Klickitat School District faces declining enrollment in a community with one of the state's worst unemployment rates. Steilacoom School District grapples with the needs of diverse neighborhoods, a growing population, and a shortage of basic state funds.

Their experiences raise the difficult question of what is fair, and the equally difficult answer that it's not the same for every district.



## Index School District #63

### Grades served

Pre-K through 7th grade  
in one facility

### Number of students

43

### FY 2002–2003 Budget

\$600,000

### Location

Northwestern Washington,  
on the northwest slopes of  
the Cascade Mountains

“Community” was the theme of Index’s 2002–2003 school year. It aptly expresses what this tiny school district, surrounded on all sides by towering granite peaks, is all about.

The 1950s-era gleaming white school building pulsates with energy, drawing in not only students, but siblings and parents, as well as the occasional canine. It’s not unusual to see a mom casually stopping by to help weed the flower and vegetable beds that the preschoolers planted, or one of the town’s 350 residents strolling into the office to use the only fax machine for 30 miles around.

Everyone turns out for the superintendent’s barbeque in the adjacent

park, and the school’s gym/auditorium serves as a venue for community gatherings like the ambitious plays put on by students. Even the school newsletter is a hot item, disappearing from a stack in the town’s combination post office and general store.

When Superintendent Martin Boyle arrived on the scene seven years ago, the picture was bleak. The district was on the verge of bankruptcy with just \$10 in reserves. It had seen 10 superintendents in 12 years. The building was in disrepair. Standardized test scores averaged in the low teens, staff morale was abysmal, and playground fights were a regular fixture of recess. “You didn’t hear any laughter, just crying,” Boyle remembers.

The sound you hear today is the steady hum of kids learning. Even though summer beckons, students remain on-task. In the sunny pre-school headquarters, youngsters help themselves to plastic bins overflowing with art supplies and books. In the music room next door, third- and fourth-graders keep the beat with an eclectic collection of percussion instruments. Just down the hallway, fifth- and sixth-graders are industriously solving problems on a row of sleek computers, which arrived courtesy of the Gates Foundation. Virtually every Index student has passed the state reading test in the last several years, and a majority passed all four of the WASL tests.

Despite Boyle’s success in turning the school district around, Index may be in danger of slipping back to its inglorious past. Word came in May that the district was losing 100 percent of its federal Title I funding—all

\$207,000—on top of \$50,000 in state spending cuts. Hard-won grants for everything from capital improvements to technology training are also expiring, leaving the district with one-third less in its coffers for next school year. On the list of cuts: a full-time teacher for first and second grades; the full-time art and technology instructor; one full-time aide; the part-time music teacher; and the part-time school nurse. The preschool and summer adventure camps—often the only organized activity for most Index children—are also on the chopping block. And, Boyle's own 0.7 FTE job will shrink to just one day a week.

The loss of the school's Title I funds is a lesson in politics and demographics. The Title I program provides federal education funds based on the number of students who live at or below the national poverty level. Several years ago, the U.S. Congress revamped the funding formula, and Index was one of 77 small school districts in the country severely impacted. By working with congressional leaders, Index was able to get a "hold harmless" agreement that kept the district out of the funding formula and left its money largely intact.

Recently, with a new administration in the White House and changes in national education policy, the agreement was lifted. Index's funding for the coming school year was figured solely on the basis of the 2000 census. "It showed only three of our students living in poverty," says Boyle, "even though at least 70 percent of our students are on the free and reduced-price lunch program." The discrepancy lies in the fact that the district draws many children from

homeless families and from the ramshackle cabins hidden away inaccessible in the woods. These households are so far off the grid that they're invisible—often intentionally so—to government census-takers.

"The community jokes that a lot of our families have two incomes: welfare and disability," says Boyle sardonically. The natural resource-based industries that once made Index one of the state's larger and more prosperous towns have all evaporated: the granite quarry that produced the steps for the state capitol building sits idle; copper, silver, and gold mining are a thing of the past; and the forests are quiet now.

Boyle will challenge the loss of federal poverty funds but even a reprieve won't come in time to spare the teaching staff that's more like a family than a group of colleagues. Becky Jussel packed up her first- and second-grade classroom knowing she won't be back, but still grateful for the experience gained over the last year. "It's been a huge blessing," she says. "There's been an incredible amount of support." Jussel, a beginning teacher, was encouraged to visit other schools, observe master teachers, and incorporate their lessons in her classroom of 10 boys and one girl.

Eight-year veteran Kristi Douglas also won't return. "I'm shell-shocked," admits the technology and art teacher, "I had all these plans for next year. Now, the other teachers will have to take up the slack and determine how much time they can put into teaching kids computers and art. With all the other things they have to do, the quality of instruction in those areas will be hurt."

Boyle, who won a statewide Most Effective Administrator Award last year for districts under 500 students, admits he may start sending out his résumé. "It's one thing to build a program, and another to dismantle it," he sadly observes. "You can take kids that other people have given up on and do something great with them, but money makes the difference."

Still, Boyle won't be going without a fight. "We're going to attempt to turn this into a cooperative elementary school, keeping it together somehow. We don't want to give up and let it atrophy." Boyle muses that he may use part of his one-day-per-week salary to pay the music instructor. Plus, he's got another development strategy going: every Wednesday and Friday, he buys Lotto tickets for his staff, hoping a jackpot will save the dream they've built together.



## Klickitat School District #402

### Grades served

K–12 in two buildings with shared gym

### Number of students

172

### FY 2002–2003 Budget

\$2.1 million (including  
\$250,000 in grants)

### Location

South central Washington,  
in the Columbia River Gorge

If you call a Klickitat High School student a “vandal,” it’s not an insult. The school’s official nickname derives from the lore of the Klickitat tribe, which was proudly known as robbers and thieves. Like their indigenous predecessors, the current townspeople and their children are fiercely battling to hang on to their traditions and to an endangered community.

The school district, with its trio of long grey buildings, sits with its back to the Wild and Scenic Klickitat River. It faces a string of modest wood frame houses that smack up against steep canyon walls. In this landlocked town, a dozen miles off the Columbia Gorge highway, timber used to rule. The lumber mill owned the town and kept its workforce busy. Today, the mill is long gone, and the nearby aluminum smelters have closed too, leaving

Klickitat with one of the highest unemployment rates in the state.

“Declining enrollment, which is linked to the economy, is one of our biggest issues,” says Superintendent Richard Wilde. Despite the joblessness and the fact that almost 60 percent of the students are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, the district still managed to pass a levy by more than 67 percent two years ago. But, the rate of \$4.50 per \$1,000 valuation brings in a mere \$80,000 a year in this property-poor community.

To stretch the district’s funds and fulfill all the state and federal requirements, Wilde and his 25-member staff wear many hats. “We’re held accountable just the same as districts the size of Evergreen, but we don’t have all those support personnel,” says Kevin Davis, the junior/senior high school principal who considers himself a “youngster” because he’s only been here 20 years. Davis—who knows every kid’s name, plus the name of his dog—wonders how to get “48 hours out of a 24-hour day.”

Like Davis, Jim Reed finds his days jam-packed. Reed teaches a different subject every period: geometry, trigonometry, biology, chemistry, algebra II, college-bound math, and junior class projects are all part of his daily load. The gregarious, long-haired Reed has the distinction of being one of 110 teachers to receive a Radio Shack National Teacher Award for his commitment to academic excellence in math, science, and technology.

Despite the laurels, Reed—and the rest of the instructional staff—

will have to prove they’re “highly qualified” to teach their courses in the coming years. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, schools must ensure that teachers of core academic subjects have either a college major, state certification, and/or demonstrated competency in each of those subjects. “That’s going to present a formidable problem when you have just four teachers in a high school covering all of your core classes,” sighs Superintendent Wilde. “The laws are written for urban areas without much consideration for small schools.”

The problem of fitting into a mold designed for a bigger-size district constantly resurfaces. But, the negative can also turn into a positive, as staff members are forced to stretch their skills. Instead of relying on curriculum specialists and data analysts, Klickitat teachers will return to school early next fall to sort through each student’s WASL scores themselves. They’ll design individualized learning plans to help all students improve their scores. “If I were in Vancouver, I couldn’t do that,” observes Davis.

This year, the staff took on the Herculean task of making the curriculum more relevant and prompting students to take responsibility for their own learning. With the help of a Gates grant, teachers researched project-based learning models and then completely redesigned how Klickitat’s ninth- through twelfth-graders spend their day. Mornings are devoted to core classes, while the afternoons focus on individual projects like producing a play, researching alcoholism, or even building an airplane. “We saw



light bulbs really coming on for kids and the staff,” says Wilde. “We’re instilling in students the desire to be lifelong learners.”

Of Klickitat’s 13 graduating seniors, half will matriculate to community colleges and universities. The rest of the class will join the military or hit the job market. They leave behind a school that innovates out of necessity. For example, all 172 of the district’s students cross the state highway each day to lunch at the River House restaurant. When the school was built in the mid-1950s, it had no cafeteria because students went home for their midday meal. Now, it’s more cost-effective for the district to contract with the town’s only restaurant rather than provide its own food service.

In a place where the school bulletin reminds children not to play with rattlesnakes and where the only campus lockdown in recent memory occurred when a black bear wandered onto the grounds, Klickitat stands a world apart from its urban peers. “There’s a big difference between a school district with 500 kids or 2,000 or 20,000,” says Superintendent Wilde. “A state legislator has to ask, ‘How much do you pay to educate one kid because of where his family chooses to live?’ In Seattle, it might cost you \$5,000 but in Klickitat, it costs \$10,000 for the same education. Where do you draw the line?”

Wilde admits it’s a tough question not only for legislators, but for school boards and administrators alike, as they try to determine equitable treatment for large and small systems in everything from facilities, staffing, required reporting, and data collection to meaningful student outcomes.



## Steilacoom Historical School District #1

### Grades served

Pre-K–12

### Number of students

2,087 in seven schools

### FY 2002–2003 Budget

\$14 million

### Location

Southern tip of Puget Sound

Some of the line items on Superintendent Art Himmler’s budget might raise a few eyebrows, like the \$16,000 for ferry tickets each year. But, Steilacoom boasts one of the farthest-flung school districts, stretching over four different municipalities and encompassing two remote island schools.

The historic district, founded by fur trappers in 1854, is home to a nine-student elementary school on the grounds of a state corrections center as well as a more typical high school with 650 pupils. Classrooms are as likely to be filled with the offspring of Intel scientists as with the children of Ft. Lewis soldiers, McNeil Island prison guards, or Puget Sound loggers and orchard owners.

With so many different constituencies to serve, Himmler’s biggest challenge is cohesiveness. “It’s not like a contiguous town with a single culture,” he notes.

“It’s extraordinarily difficult to get consensus on issues.”

Himmler also struggles with running a small district stuck in the middle of big ones. Unlike neighbors such as Clover Park or Tacoma, Steilacoom doesn’t have the enrollment or the poverty levels to qualify for hefty federal funding and grants. Still, it faces the same pressure to boost student achievement.

One thing Steilacoom does have, in spades, is community involvement. “I’ve never seen the kind of volunteer spirit we have anywhere else,” says Himmler. At the red brick Pioneer Middle School, just on the edge of the old town center, volunteers completely refurbished a ball field, donating everything from fencing to dugouts. Community members also overhauled the rock-strewn playground at Anderson Island Elementary, where a dedicated group of retirees serves as reading buddies for the tiny school’s 44 children. And, one senior citizen makes an 80-minute round trip each day from her home in Eatonville to volunteer as the crossing guard at Chloe Clark Elementary in suburban Dupont.

Chloe Clark, with its multiage classes, is one of the shining stars of the Steilacoom system. Built just two years ago for kindergarten through fourth grade, the bright and airy facility exudes friendliness. “From the beginning, our building has had a wonderful feel: real warmth and acceptance,” brags Principal Gary Yoho. Each day begins with all 250 kids assembled in the gym for community time. It’s

a chance to celebrate birthdays, share poetry, and have emerging readers show off their new skills. Students regularly pop into Yoho's office to read books to him—an interruption that's welcome any time of day.

"I view our school as an idea factory," says Yoho. "Sometimes teachers come forward with an idea that may be dismissed as too unusual in some schools, but if it's good for kids, we may put it into practice." The ideas range from "Walk to School Day" to *The Dog Days of Dupont*, a student-produced arts' magazine that features stories about pupils' pets. "Pie in the Eye of the Principal" is a much-anticipated annual event where the class with the biggest increase in PTA membership earns the right to bombard Yoho with sticky desserts. "I wind up digging whipped cream out of my ears for weeks," he laughs. A more serious—and less messy—tradition is the attribute of the month. If students are "caught" displaying an attribute like kindness, endurance, or effort, they're invited to sign an impressive-looking clothbound book kept ready in Yoho's office.

That same kind of accessibility and warmth is evident at nearby Cherrydale Primary, which caters to 390 preschoolers through second-graders. With its cheerful cherry-printed curtains and bright colors, Cherrydale feels as comfortable and personal as your favorite aunt's home.

Like the other Steilacoom District schools, Cherrydale depends heavily on volunteers, who contribute as

many as 1,000 hours a month. "The fact that volunteers feel so connected becomes a stabilizing force for our students," says Penny Jackson, Pupil Services Director. "The kids see the same adult every Tuesday for a half-hour (of individualized reading help), and it gives them something that many don't have in their home life. Some of our children don't look forward to the summer break because we provide them with food, a predictable schedule, and a safe place."

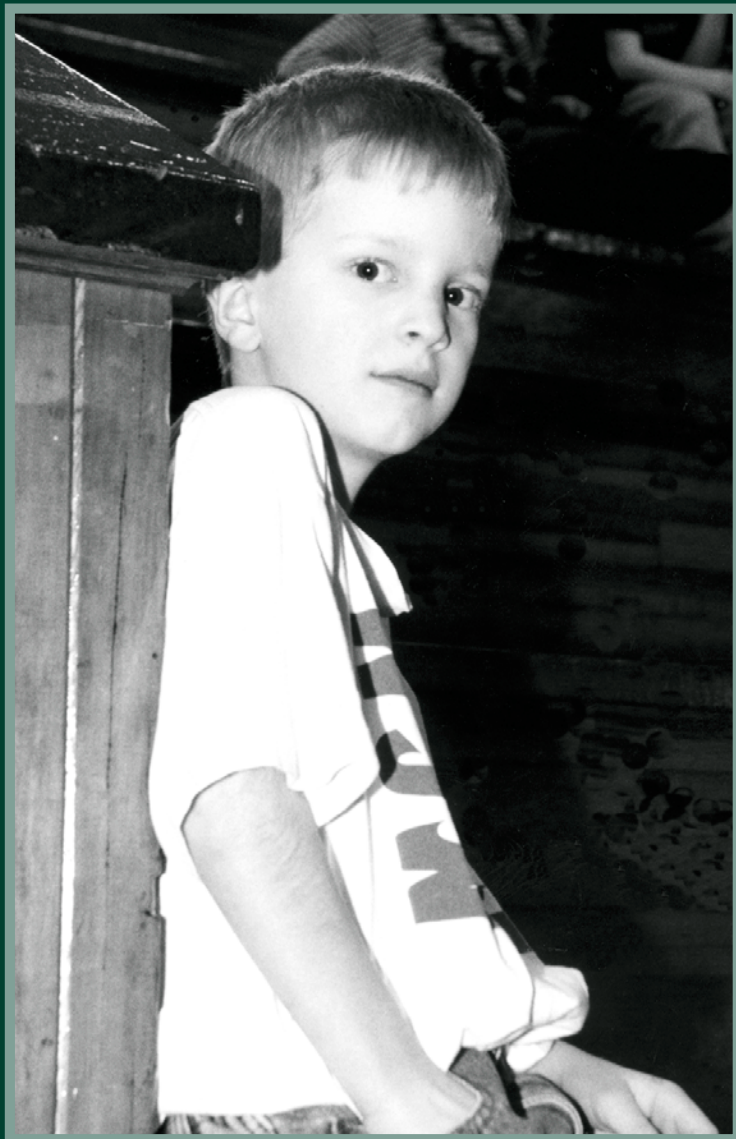
Cherrydale's ebullient principal, Deva Ward, proudly shows off the tutoring room and the well-equipped science resource center that's staffed entirely by community members. The science center, with its sophisticated computers and microscope attachments, was outfitted through grants and donations. Funding for the reading room came piecemeal from a number of different programs.

"I've never been in a school that has had to be as creative with funds," says Ward. "We're kind of stuck in a middle class dilemma: we don't have a high enough degree of poverty to qualify for grants. And while we have the same problems as an urban district, we don't have enough of them to support ameliorative programs."

Complaints about the lack of sustainable, adequate funding echo throughout the district, even in the relatively privileged hallways of Chloe Clark Elementary. Superintendent Himmler bemoans the fact that legal fees, new technology, and soaring insurance premiums weren't part of the equation in

1977 when the Basic Education Act was constructed. "I get the same basic education dollars now that I got back then. That needs to be reexamined, in light of changing times," he asserts.

Cherrydale's Penny Jackson finds it ironic that small schools seem to be on the endangered species list at the same time that larger schools are trying to emulate them. "The trend seems to be for big districts to take over the smaller ones, but the research indicates that the best results are achieved at smaller schools," says Jackson. "We need to value small schools that create an environment that aids children's progress and that foster a sense of community ownership. When you lose the small school, you lose that community connectedness." ■



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Washington State University

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This project has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-01-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.